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EDITORIAL

Ancient Perspectives on Technology

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Advanced technology may be fittingly considered a distinguishing feature of the contemporary world. In the last decades, technological development seemingly widened the range of human possibilities and *Hi-tech* flooded from laboratories and specialised

contexts into everyday life, reshaping the way in which mankind interacts with the outer environment. During this (so-called) '*Anthropocene era*', artificial intelligence, biomechanics, transfer of consciousness, robotics etc. would be the pieces of evidence of a new alleged ability to bend nature to our purposes. Apparently, technological development is gradually digging a rift between us and the animal world from which we originated, putting under pressure concepts such as *human*, *mind*, *nature*, *beauty*, *life/death* and so forth. Hence, technology is at the core of a heated philosophical debate today and research on it splits into hard critics and faithful supporters. In principle, indeed, advanced technology seems to raise new and fundamental questions as it apparently provides a human subject with an infinite range of incoming possibilities: so, are there any problems implied by technology? Should we think of boundaries and limits to be established for technological advancement, so to preserve *nature*? Or, on the other way around, should we rethink philosophical concepts according to the possibilities that technology is now providing to us? Are we entitled to exceed the limits that nature imposes to us? Are there any limits of sort?

Understandably, most of the contemporary research activities in philosophy and the humanities feel the urgency to address such questions, as human technological devices – in research and industrial environments as well as in daily life – keep moving forward at an unprecedented speed. Yet, on a closer look, the puzzles concerning technology and human nature, with which we deal today, are not new. Quite the opposite, the debate on nature and technology – regardless of its contemporary degree of sophistication – grounds its roots in ancient sources and surprisingly, many ancient accounts can be glimpsed behind the contemporary disputes.

In fact, even by adapting to the contemporary technological scenario, some very famous philosophical paradoxes alone: how many parts of a human being can be technologically substituted before being in the presence of a different subject? Is a 90% hybrid subject still the same person as before hybridisation? Notably, answers to such questions are complex and likely grounded on one's

metaphysical assumptions. Though, there is no reason why ancient perspectives on nature and technology could not cast a new light on them. Quite the opposite, facing contemporary challenges from an ancient standpoint may well constitute a crucial contribution to the understanding of what is it to be a human, at the time of technocracy.

The present volume goes in this direction, re-proposing ancient perspectives on technology (or *techne*) which, regardless of the contemporary and lively debate, are often neglected. This Special Issue focuses primarily on ancient philosophy, from Greek to Hellenistic and early Christian philosophy to see how ancient philosophers' argumentations on *technology* and *human nature* cope with the contemporary discussions, and how the contemporary achievements of technology recast ancient accounts. In other words, this volume aimed to encourage the proposal of ancient views on *techne* (defended or criticised) and highlight their usefulness towards a resolution of the contemporary disputes about advanced technology.

The opening article, entitled *The Demon of Technology – The History of Western Demonology and its role in the contemporary nature-technology debate* proposes to look at the most recent concerns about hard-technology, as a re-proposition of the myth of Prometheus. Like the mythical titan, the contemporary supporter of artificial intelligence, biomechanics etc. can be either accused of being a subverter of the natural order of things, or praised as a humanist hero, who is going to better human nature once and forever. In light of the history of Western demonology, from ancient to modern, which demonstrates how the idea of demon arose as a representation of our worries about the limits of human nature, the essay looks at technology as the unexpected demon of contemporary age. Its technical possibilities lead mankind to reason about the limits of human nature. Yet, neither a sceptic rejection of hard technology, on the basis of an alleged defence of *nature*, nor the unconditional acceptance of its promise of a future mastery over the natural realm, can satisfy the concerns of the contemporary reader. Only a third way, in which the demon of technology is read in a more neutral

meaning – as already suggested by ancient Greek demonology – leaves open room to hopes for getting rid of the relationship between human nature and technology.

The subsequent section includes articles that analyse the relationship and mutual influence between technology and ancient thought, with a major emphasis on the material foundations of philosophy. In particular, Robert Hahn's contribution, entitled *Architectural technologies and the origins of Greek Philosophy*, puts forth an intriguing challenge to the idea of philosophy as a purely theoretical and speculative discipline. The author mainly focuses on Ancient architecture and building technologies, as a paradigmatic example of technological *thaumata* which – as the Greeks propounded their effort to produce them – contributed to discover, reflect and somehow reshape the nature's order. In reference to the cosmogonical architecture of Anaximander of Miletus, Hahn claims that the observation of technological techniques towed ancient Greek speculative thinking and acted as a manifest evidence of "a new vision of nature […] that, surprisingly, humans could grasp and command". In his view, at the time architecture was a representation of the human capacity to control nature, and opened a new vision of our human rational capacity to understand both the world and our place in it. The following article, entitled *The Techne of Nutrition in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, interestingly covers a subject, which is often neglected within the philosophical debate. Indeed, in this piece of work, Anthony Preus devotes his attention to the *technai* of food preparation and nutritional knowledge. After introducing a challenging tension contained in Plato's *Gorgias* – related to the paradigmatic usage of the term *techne* in connection to food – the analysis of three distinct approaches to food preparation and technology (namely those of Empedocles, Anaxagoras and the treatise *Regimen*) allows the author to argue in favour of the philosophical relevance – besides the technically informative character – of *Regimen* for the contemporary reader.

The articles included in the second section of the volume tackle the *nature-technology* relation, from a different perspective which

pays attention to ethical issues. *Theurgy and Transhumanism*, the first contribution presented in this second section, is a work by Eric Steinhart. Intriguingly, Steinhart introduces the concept of *theurgy* – the system of magical practices grounded on a neoplatonic echo, and widespread in the late Roman Empire – in order to compare it with contemporary *transhumanism*. According to the author, transhumanists who are now looking forward to producing technological hybrids, artificial intelligences etc. have much in common, as for their approach, with ancient metaphysical knowledge, and particularly with Platonic and Pythagorean metaphysics. Indeed, apart from their complexity, technical activities carried out, today and then, all share goals and methods. The transhumanist counterpart of Neoplatonism, then, would be their interest in "genetics, self-tracking with biosensors, artificial intellects like Google and Siri, brain-computer interfaces, programming, and robotics" and "transhumanist techno-theurgy shows how Neoplatonism can be a modern philosophical way of life". In accordance with the idea behind this volume – namely that of providing a variegate set of approaches – the following article, written by Philip Krinks, moves towards a different direction. In his piece, entitled *The End of Love? Questioning technocracy in Plato's Symposium* Krinks's focus is on Plato's *Symposium*, comparing the technocratic account of Eryximachus – who holds that medical *techne* can create an orderly erotic harmony; while religion is defined as the curing of disorderly eros – with Diotima's idea of *telos*. According to Socrates, the *telos* lies not in technical exhaustiveness, but rather in a dialectical interpretation of what *eros* is meant to be. According to the author, nothing could account for certain, unsolvable features of humanity. The erotic harmony recommended by Eryximachus, should always be subject to the very intuitive – but still, extremely complex – question of whether 'it happens to be good' or not.

The third and last section of this Special Issue, is devoted to an analysis of the concept of technology through the apparently loose lens of artistic production and creative activity. It is up to Pier Alberto Porceddu Cilione to break the seal, with his article entitled *Towards*

an artistic Account of Nature – Morphology, Hylology, Hylomorphism. In this work, Cilione challenges the idea of a robust divide between *physis* and *techne*. Through an attempt of re-define the terms involved in the debate, the author reformulates the distinction between *natural* and *artificial* form. Originally, the trait d'union is found by Cilione in art, intended as the conceptual mediator that holds together a morphological determination of nature and a technical determination of art. As he puts it, "Artificiality should not be understood as the opposite of naturalness", given the possibility to read *techne* as something comprehended into nature, and connected to artistic activities in a way that depends on an hylomorphic account of reality. The last article of the volume, *Plato's Theory of the Arts in the Gorgias and Republic*, by Thomas Schmid, examines Socrates' theory of the arts in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*. According to the author, Socrates' idea of a fruitful, scientific political art is bound to struggle with the argumentation of those who raise doubts on its fundamental epistemic closure. And yet, Thrasymachus' sophisms about tyrannical domination do not fare better as they seem to lead to self-destructive forms of government. The tension between the two, that remains partially unsolved, gives back the sense of uncertainty between two apparently irreconcilable poles.

While technological products move towards unpredictable – and sometimes apparently uncontrolled – developments; contemporary questions about technology and nature appear to be frequently begged because of ethical, religious or economical, in principle assumptions. In seeking orientation points towards a conceivable and alternative path, the works included in this issue appear to provide a promising set of readings. The variegate perspectives put forth herein could perhaps represent a useful contribution to the current *nature-technology* debate, by providing a number of unexpected insights and – perhaps more importantly – by stimulating further readings and calling for more research on the topic. Before giving the way to the essays, however, I wish to thank the scholars who contributed with their works as well as those involved in the peer-review process, for their generous assistance as referees and their critical comments,

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